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Everyday Objects

Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture
and its Meanings

Edited by Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson

ASHGATE

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In the Sight of an Old Pair of Shoes

Stephen Kelly

Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as these surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable.¹

A Cautionary Tale

Words and things have long been at war.² It is a war for supremacy. Both sides think they've won.

Words describe the world and therefore assume that they also constitute it. It is impossible, after all, to *describe* the world without signs. Words offer their services with an indefatigable confidence in their own necessity.

Things constitute the world and the humans who live in the world. Humans themselves are things: things among other things who also happen, endlessly, to make things. But in order to distinguish between things – in order to recognise a function and meaning for things beyond what their initial plasticity dictates – humans need words. The question is this: do humans apply words to things, or do things themselves 'talk'?³ Indeed, is there a domain of mutual constitution⁴ where, in fact, words and things are not at all at war?

1 W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London, 1998), p. 177.

2 Peter Swenger, 'Words and the Murder of the Thing', in Bill Brown (ed.), *Things* (Chicago, IL, 2005), pp. 135–50.

3 See Lorraine Daston (ed.), *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York, 2004).

4 See Christopher Tilley 'Objectification', in Chris Tilley et al. (eds), *The Handbook of Material Culture* (London, 2006), pp. 60–73; and Daniel Miller, 'Materiality: An Introduction', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality* (Durham, NC, 2005), pp. 1–50.

For the scholar of contemporary words and things – words and things in the here and now – these are difficult questions. For the historian of *past things* they demand extraordinary caution. This is a cautionary tale for the historian of things.

At the Museum of London

I approached the Museum of London along a fume-choked traffic tunnel which extends from the Barbican tube station. There are more pleasurable approaches. The tunnel, lit with an orange glow, has an infernal quality, as if one is entering a hell refurbished in concrete. It should be said that I had already intended to look at the shoes. I had a vague plan to write about medieval walking of a particular kind: the leisured, as opposed to devotional, perambulations of the late medieval pilgrim. Rather than examine the usual perspectives, I had thought to discuss the everyday objects which accompany the pious *flâneur*. I had already made a study of shoes, having devoured the Museum of London's archaeological study *Shoes and Pattens*.⁵ I had no real reason, other than the fact that I was in London anyway, to see the actual shoes. But some obligation to see the *thing itself* sent me to the Museum.

The Museum of London's exhibitions are organised in what has become a standard fashion: a narrative procession is made from London's earliest times to a modernity defined by world wars, royal marriages, economic expansion and ethnic variety. In keeping with much modern museology, the Museum allows the moments it attempts to represent to leak out, in the name of immersion, into its exhibitionary spaces. Thus, as one moves among the glass cases containing the material remains of medieval London, one passes through faux Gothic arches, alongside recovered stonework and past stained glass windows.

But then I came upon the shoes: featureless pieces of leather, displayed alongside the accoutrements of their manufacture, occasionally contextualised with a laminated illustration of cobblers or consumers from nameless medieval manuscripts. I felt a sudden, inexplicable shock, a feeling of nausea or disorientation. Why? What was I seeing? There was nothing extraordinary about the exhibition – and yet, looking at these shoes I had a sudden sense of... Well, whatever I sensed has no place, of course, within an academic essay. Humanities scholarship has studiously excised the affective dimension of the experience of cultural artefacts from its intellectual purview. Our subjective experience of things must be separated definitively from our awareness of their social or cultural utility, or ideological function. It would be remiss of me

5 Francis Grew and Margrethe de Neergaard, *Shoes and Pattens* (Woodbridge, 2001).

to continue discussing the curious effect upon me of seeing medieval shoes in the Museum. And yet.

And yet there seems to me a clear relationship between my disorientating experience at the Museum of London and the discourses used to discuss materiality in general, everyday objects in particular and – for our purposes here – shoes specifically. Shoes, according to cultural historians Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil, are ‘ever present’. In the collection *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers*, Riello reminds us:

footwear is more than a simple wrapping or protection for the foot. The notion that shoes indicate a great deal about a person’s taste (or disdain for such things) and identity – national, regional, professional – class status and gender, is not an invention of modernity. Shoes have, for centuries, given hints about a person’s character, social and cultural place, even sexual preference.⁶

Shoes, it is believed, are the items of clothing which most authentically signify their wearers. As Riello and his co-editor continue:

Of all garments shoes are uniquely independent from the physical body. They have a shape that they keep even when the wearer is absent. Most clothes can only be displayed through the use of props such [as] mannequins, but shoes are ‘self-standing.’ This peculiar nature explains why they often stand for something else that is not physically present.⁷

Shoes, then, fulfil a function of adequation: they re-present what is no longer present: they literally stand for what is gone. Perhaps, then, the character of my encounter with medieval shoes had been preordained by this function of adequation, this ‘standing-for’. Perhaps it had also been determined by the Museum itself.

The museum, says Donald Preziosi, ‘is one of the most brilliant and powerful genres of modern fiction’. It shares ‘with other forms of ideological practice ... a variety of methods for the production and factualization of knowledge and its sociopolitical consequences’.⁸ Museological practices, says Preziosi, ‘have played a fundamental role in fabricating, maintaining and disseminating many of the essentialist and historicist fictions which make up the social realities of the modern world’.

For Preziosi, and many critics of contemporary museological practice,⁹ the museum is itself a representational space, an ideological theatre of

6 Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil, ‘A Long Walk: Shoes, People and Places’, in Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (eds), *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers* (Oxford, 2006), p. 3.

7 Riello and McNeil, ‘A Long Walk’, p. 9.

8 Donald Preziosi, ‘Collecting/Museums’, in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds), *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd edition (Chicago, IL, 2003), p. 407.

9 See particularly Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, 1995); Nick Merriman, *Making Early Histories in Museums* (London, 1999); Janet

memory which portrays “‘history” or the past through objects and images staged as relics of that past ... Passage through museological space ... is commonly constructed as a simulation of travel though time.”¹⁰ And of course, the objective of that passage is to arrive in the space of the present where one’s own gaze is privileged, an act which can only be achieved through a process of translation. For Preziosi, museums make, in a powerful phrase, ‘the visible legible’. They translate things into representational domains of discourse, textuality or theatricality which are assumed to be more productive of knowledge:

In rendering the visible legible, museum objects are literally both there and not there, and in two distinct ways. In the first place the object is both quite obviously materially part of its position (situation) in the historiographic theater of the museum ... Yet at the same time it is unnaturally borne there from some other milieu, from some ‘original’ situation: its present situation is in one sense fraudulent (this museum is not ‘its’ place). In the second place, the object’s significance is both present and absent ... its semiotic status is both referential and differential; it is both directly and indirectly meaningful ... For the museum user, then, the object’s material properties, no less than its significance, are simultaneously present and absent.¹¹

Present and absent – no wonder, then, the sense of disorientation. Such representational regimes produce a condition of ‘staged commensurability’: the museum object stands for, it re-presents. Its materiality is elided in preference for an assumed semiotic capacity. Words, it seems, win out over things.

The Social Lives of Things?

What is it, we might ask, that the medieval shoe stands for? What does it re-present? A possible answer is offered by Museum of London publicity materials (Illustration 3.1). The pithy ‘Still in style after all these years’ may argue for the relevance of medieval city to modern metropolis, but the juxtaposition of modern and medieval shoes produces precisely the effect of staged commensurability suggested above. In placing a medieval shoe beside a modern one, we are told that the shoe – now no longer merely itself – is ‘just like’ a modern shoe, and by inference, that the past which produced that shoe is essentially ‘just like’ the present. In such an historiographical practice, things are not permitted their materiality and must function instead as signs. In Christopher Pinney’s terms ‘the artefact is eviscerated in the all-powerful

Marstine (ed.), *New Museum Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 2005); Daniel J. Sherman (ed.), *Museums and Difference* (London, 2008).

10 Preziosi, ‘Collecting/Museums’, p. 408.

11 Preziosi, ‘Collecting/Museums’, p. 412.



Medieval London

still in style after all these years

MUSEUM OF LONDON

Illustration 3.1 Museum of London press release, 2005.

context of history or culture'.¹² Metonymy is the strategy here: the ontological status of the thing is elided or ignored in favour of the story it tells about the cultures it has come to re-present and represent. Discussing the construction of a 'social life of things' in the work of Arjun Appadurai and Nicholas Thomas, Pinney comments:

The fate of objects ... is always to live out the social life of men, or to become entangled in the webs of culture whose ability to refigure the object simultaneously inscribes culture's ability to translate things into signs and the object's powerlessness as an artifactual trace. Narratives of the social lives of things, they reaffirm the agency of those humans they pass between.¹³

Again, words seem to win. Here is historiography's wish: to instrumentalise things, to 'diagnose' them as 'symptoms' of pre-existing, and therefore pre-determining, culture or history. Might such a pre-determining cultural history have framed my own encounter with the medieval shoe? In other words, is it possible to *actually perceive* a medieval shoe at all, when the empty shoe has become such a pregnant signifier of twentieth-century horrors?

Metonymic Commensurability

In an essay entitled 'Empty Shoes' Ellen Carol Jones struggles with the historiographer's ambivalent attitude to things, to the *thingness* of things.¹⁴ She invokes the capacity of shoes, as Riello put it, 'to stand for something else that is not physically present'. Her subject is the survival of thousands of shoes owned by victims of the Holocaust. She describes them as follows: 'abject survivors of the abjection suffered by the men and women and children killed in the Shoah, the shoes – derelict, decaying – figure the abandonment of European Jewry by the West, the decomposition of a people under the Nazis.'¹⁵ Revealingly, Jones cannot allow the shoes themselves to 'figure the abandonment of European Jewry'; she finds the need to render the visible legible, to force adequation, irresistible: the shoes are 'derelict, decaying'. The metonymy multiplies, as shoes are now ruins, remnants, biological remains, rotting like the corpses of the dead.

What we have here is a process of 'metonymic commensurability'. It provides the basis for a particular – and I would argue dangerous – form of

12 Christopher Pinney, 'Things Happen: Or, from Which Moment Does That Object Come?', in Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, p. 459.

13 Pinney, 'Things Happen', p. 459.

14 Ellen Carol Jones, 'Empty Shoes', in Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss (eds), *Footnotes: On Shoes* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2001), pp. 197–232.

15 Jones, 'Empty Shoes', p. 197.

memorialising in much Holocaust historiography.¹⁶ The extent to which the empty shoe has become a signifier of the scale and human impact of Nazi crimes is demonstrated, as Jones suggests, in the endless reproduction of images of piles of shoes at Auschwitz or Birkenau. In contemporary forms of cultural memory, images of shoes accumulated by death-camp workers have come to stand, metonymically, for murdered Jews. Jones illustrates this view: 'The shoes' very presence signals the absence of those humans who once wore them, their materiality a *metonymy* for a corporeality obliterated' (my emphasis).¹⁷ But such an equation further instrumentalises and denigrates the human singularity of each victim. Reduced to an absence signified, paradoxically, by what remains – namely, shoes – victims of the Holocaust are again robbed of the fact and distinctiveness of their historical existence. The temptation to poeticise everyday objects in contexts such as the Holocaust is hard to resist: 'I imagined', says the narrator of Canadian writer Anne Michaels' novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, 'that if each pair of shoes could be named, they could be brought back to life.'¹⁸ Such an impulse seems also to guide the work of Jenny Stolzenberg, whose work 'Shoes of Memory' acts, in the artist's own terms, as a commemoration (Illustration 3.2).

But acts of commemoration or identification rooted in forms of metonymic commensurability, as well-meaning as they may be, act to homogenise individual lives in a 'mass' to be made legible through historiographic discourse. Referring to the museological presentation of Holocaust artefacts, Andrea Liss, in a critique which readily applies to Stolzenberg's work, suggests that the fact that:

the experience becomes aesthetic is inevitable; what is on display is not the horrific real, but artifactual remnants mandated to bring the viewer to a place of difficult approach, a place of fleeting, overwhelming and yet resistant empathy. The aestheticizing activities of the museum must create bridges for guarded, imaginative projections and (im)possible witnessings ... The metonymy is eerie, deadening; the theatrical effect materializes the real into its evocation. The shoes thus become an empty yet elegant metonym.¹⁹

'With My Feet in My Hands'

The reductive, not to mention ethically problematic, symbolisation of victims in terms of what remains can be contrasted, instructively, with testimonies

16 See Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY, 2004), for a powerful critique of 'trauma studies'.

17 LaCapra, *History in Transit*, p. 203.

18 Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (London, 1998), p. 50.

19 Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis, MN, 1998), p. 78.



SHOES OF MEMORY: HOLOCAUST CERAMIC WORK BY JENNY STOLZENBERG

The seventy pairs of ceramic shoes that make up the exhibition *Shoes of Memory: Holocaust Ceramic Work* by Jenny Stolzenberg, evoke the memory of those who were lost in a concrete and tangible way. In addition to the ceramic shoes, images of the piles of shoes, clothing, hair, glasses and suitcases found in the warehouses of Auschwitz at liberation represent the absence of the millions of people who perished in the Holocaust.

Meticulously researched and rendered in clay, Stolzenberg's shoes return a sense of identity to the victims of the Holocaust by rescuing the shoes from their anonymity in the piles at Auschwitz.

The exhibit highlights the use of contemporary ceramics to address social justice issues and to explore the desire of second-generation artists to interpret the Holocaust and work through the traumatic history of their own survivor parents.

Stolzenberg's piece titled, "Forgive But Do Not Forget," forms the centrepiece of this exhibit. Her work has been widely exhibited in Great Britain and Europe, but had not previously been shown in North America.

For information on the artist and her work please visit:
www.jennystolzenbergceramics.com



EXHIBIT INVENTORY

The exhibit consists of an installation of 70 pairs of glazed ceramic shoes placed in a queue formation and the following support materials:

- 4 banners (35" x 72") ceiling hung, can also be wall mounted (requires approximately 10' of wall space): Title panel, Artist's biography and statement, Importance of shoes in the camps, "Kanada" warehouses
- 4 vinyl panels (36" x 36") replicating windows with images of confiscated goods (tallesim, hair, clothing and shoes) from Auschwitz warehouses

Each venue must provide a platform, measuring approximately 5' by 10' and no more than 24" off the floor. It is preferable to be able to walk all the way around the outside of the platform, rather than the installation being placed against a wall.

RENTAL CONDITIONS

The rental fee is \$2,500 for a 4 to 6 week period. The borrowing institution must cover all shipping costs and must use a qualified fine art shipping company. Longer time periods can be accommodated if the schedule permits. A deposit of \$750 is required to hold dates. The exhibit is shipped in one crate measuring 56.5" (144 cm) wide x 54.5" (139 cm) tall x 19.5" (49 cm) deep and weighing 320 lbs (145 kg).

The fee includes high quality scans for use in posters or publicity, teaching materials, a poster design template, and a biography of the artist. The artist Jenny Stolzenberg may be available for openings or to speak about the work.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Vancouver, BC, Canada V5Z 2N7

tel. 604.264.0499

email. info@vhec.org

fax. 604.264.0497

www.vhec.org

SHIPPING SPECIFICATIONS

Summary: 1 wood crate

1 Crate: 57" x 55" x 20" / 320 lbs

Note: we recommend that you check the means and cost of shipping before booking an exhibit.



Illustration 3.2 Press release: Jenny Stolzenberg at the Vancouver Holocaust Museum, 'Forgive but Do Not Forget'. Reproduced with permission of Jenny Stolzenberg and the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre.

of Holocaust survivors. Primo Levi's accounts record the varying, multiple meaning of shoes for those enduring slavery and humiliation at the hands of the Nazis:

We must take off our shoes but pay great attention that they are not stolen. ... Stolen by whom? Why should our shoes be stolen? Now another German comes and tells us to put the shoes in a certain corner, and we put them there, because now it is all over and we feel outside this world and the only thing is to obey. Someone comes with a broom and sweeps away all the shoes, outside the door in a heap. He is crazy, he is mixing them all together, ninety-six pairs, they will be all unmatched.²⁰

And later:

If a shoe hurts, one has to go in the evening to the ceremony of the changing of the shoes: this tests the skill of the individual who, in the middle of the incredible crowd, has to be able to choose at an eye's glance one (not a pair, one) shoe, which fits. Because once the choice is made, there can be no second change.²¹

Levi's testimony records the translation of the function of shoes; detainees are now 'outside the world' – the ordinary social realm where shoes perhaps had a signifying function has been violently abolished: 'they will be all unmatched'. Instead shoes now have a meaning predicated wholly on their materiality, as they become instruments of survival. What Levi illustrates is the multifarious, ever-changing function of shoes in a specific social context. How might an historiography of everyday things access such *ad hoc* functions and, where it knows them, do so without metonymising them? But inevitably Levi's discourse is not completely immune to the temptations of metonymy:

'What do you do?' [the Greek asks]

'I'm a chemist.'

'Then you're a fool,' he said calmly. 'A man who has no shoes is a fool.'

The validity of the argument was manifest, plain: the two shapeless pieces of trash on my feet, and the two shining marvels on his. There was no justification.

I was no longer a slave; but after my first step on the path of liberty, here was I seated by the road, with my feet in my hands clumsy and useless like the broken-down locomotive we had just left. He explained to me that to be without shoes is a very serious fault. When war is waging, one has to think of two things before all others: in the first place of one's shoes, in the second place of food to eat; and not vice-versa, as the common herd believes, because he who has shoes can search for food, but the inverse is not true.²²

Levi's imagery invokes both the mechanical and the animal: without shoes, his narrator is like a 'broken-down locomotive'; he sits by the roadside 'with my feet in my hands'. Such simian imagery recalls the work of pioneering

20 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Wolf (London, 1979), pp. 28–9.

21 Levi, *If This Is a Man*, p. 40.

22 Primo Levi, *The Truce*, trans. Stuart Wolf (London, 1979), pp. 215, 224.

anthropologist Edward Tylor, among the first anthropologists to apply the suggestions of Darwinian evolution to his armchair fieldwork on 'savage societies'. As Tim Ingold has argued, following Darwin and T.H. Huxley, Tylor finds in the figure of the bound human foot the prototype of civilisation: a sketch in his book juxtaposes the human foot with that of a higher primate.²³ Tylor reports that the model of the human foot is 'purposely taken, not from the free foot of the savage, but from the European foot cramped by the stiff leather boot, because this shows in the utmost way the contrast between ape and man'.²⁴ For 'free foot of the savage' of course, one should read animal. It inevitably presents the European as the apotheosis of human evolution and it does so, again, by metonymising the shoe.

Remains to be Decoded

What I have been arguing is that any attempt to historicise 'everyday objects' while at the same time claiming to be interested in their specific materiality runs aground on the interpretative temptation to metonymise them. Histories of everyday objects locate things within a functional milieu which is already given. As Carlo Ginzburg has argued: 'the historian reads into [artistic documents] what he has already learned by other means, or what he believes he knows, and wants to "demonstrate"'.²⁵

Ginzburg's critique has important, and generally ignored, consequences for how we practise cultural history.²⁶ What else are contemporary historicisms but the attempt to *diagnose* a text or thing in terms of *symptoms* abroad at the level of culture? For Michel de Certeau, eighteenth-century medical science teaches historiography how to instrumentalise the object of its attention. In medicine 'the body is a cipher that awaits deciphering':

An analogous change takes place when tradition, a lived body, is revealed to erudite curiosity through a corpus of texts. Modern medicine and historiography are born almost simultaneously from a rift between a subject that is supposedly literate, and an object that is supposedly written in an unknown language. The latter always remains to be decoded.²⁷

23 Tim Ingold, 'Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived through the Feet', *Journal of Material Culture*, 9/3 (2004): 315–40.

24 E.B. Tylor, *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* (London, 1881), p. 43.

25 Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, MD, 1989), p. 35.

26 The shortcomings of what might be termed 'contextualism' have been recently discussed by Peter Burke, 'Context in Context', *Common Knowledge*, 8/1 (2002): 152–77; and Peter Barry, *Literature in Contexts* (Manchester, 2007).

27 Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York, 1992), p. 3.

And to be decoded, as I have been suggesting, metonymically. What would an engagement with things which did not rely on metonymy look like?

The Cherishing of Things

For contemporary artist Susan Hiller, the problem with academic discourse is its ethnological bias: the past, the individual, the object, the text are objectified by the scholar's gaze, and colonised by his interests. Hiller is acutely aware of these issues as she trained as an anthropologist, and her turn to art is a conscious rejection of, in Barbara Einzig's terms 'the Cartesian split between observation and participation'.²⁸ Hiller's art is concerned with exploring those supposedly irrational areas of human experience which are not admitted into the academy (these include automatic writing, telepathy, UFOs, the meaning of dreams, visions and so on). The ethnographer's participation in an observed culture provides Hiller with a means of deconstructing models of alterity: in works such as *Fragments* (1977–78), which involves the presentation of broken pieces and chunks of Pueblo Indian women's pottery, Hiller attacks Western modes of archaeological knowledge and the reification of the notion that material culture provides access to the larger field of culture. She remarks of her handling of material things 'I think it's a kind of cherishing of things as they are, rather than trying to make them into other things. I deal with fragments of everyday life and I'm suggesting that a fragmentary view is all we've got.'²⁹ For Hiller, art is an investigative practice, but because of its extreme subjectivity it resists the totalising, colonising pretensions of a second-order discourse of explanation and contextualisation. The work of art, says Hiller, 'is a place where one thinks, feels and acts. Here we can collectively begin to visualise new knowledges.'³⁰ In her handling of material culture, Hiller is careful not to fall into the orientalist trap of appropriation. As Lucy Lippard puts it: 'When Hiller uses cultural artefacts, from potsherds to postcards, she does not project meanings on to them but retains their "idiosyncratic nature" which affects the way they are perceived ... Something most anthropologists ignore.'³¹

Hiller is best known for an installation, now at Tate Modern, called *From the Freud Museum*. Commissioned as a response to Freud's study, and displayed in 1994 at the Freud Museum itself in Mansfield Gardens, London, *From the Freud Museum* deliberately and self-consciously attacks the project of making the 'visible legible' in museological and historiographical contexts. She uses traditional archaeological collection boxes, which have been deliberately

28 Barbara Einzig, 'Introduction', *Thinking about Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller* (Manchester, 1996), p. 8.

29 Einzig, 'Introduction', p. 28.

30 Einzig, 'Introduction', p. 1.

31 Einzig, 'Introduction', p. xii.

fashioned to emphasise the vulnerability of the artefact contained within (Illustration 3.3). These artefacts include: '*an emblem in the form of a sweet for the Royal Wedding of Diana and Charles; a ouija board; 4 bars of soap marked "Made in England"; a pamphlet on the suffering of the Jewish minority in Roumania; earth samples from the six counties of Northern Ireland...* all torn from their context to be immaculately installed and sealed within each box and then within vitrines.'³² According to Denise Robinson, it is 'paradoxically ... the process of framing that completes the tearing of the objects from their contexts'. For Robinson:

Hiller's work opposes the inheritance of the 19th Century roots in the museum which forces its objects into a taxonomy of compliance, yet there is no post-colonial duty being enacted simply to suture something back into place; the very nature of the fragment refuses this. After gathering these materials and objects through a specifically charged archival system, which in its initiation fantasised the power of recording, Hiller creates a hyper-consciousness of their new status – a living breach.³³

What are Everyday Objects?

A living breach – the work of Hiller, among others, seems to me to exemplify an engagement with things and with past things from which histories of everyday objects must learn. Her work suspends any project of adequation or commensurability. Her decision to work outside the bounds of ethnography rejects what I described earlier as the paradoxical primacy of an explanatory second-order discourse. The work of writing up, whether in history or in anthropology, reinstates metonymy as the pre-eminent means of encountering things: objects, in other words, are still inexorably bound up with their representation. The historian's desire to see in everyday objects some trace of a sponsoring culture or some record of human agency instantiated, for a moment, *in a thing*, becomes a form of theology in which he or she seeks a real presence no longer present. Domestication is key here: in order to be rendered sensible, things must be accommodated; that is, they must be incorporated into a regime of material relations and a discourse of cultural significance. The operant strategy is, as I have been arguing, metonymy: the *thingness* of things is elided in favour of an objecthood which is already given by morality, economy or politics.

But the procedures of metonymy can break down, as they did, for me, at the Museum of London. 'The shock', says Giorgio Agamben, 'is the jolt of power acquired by things when they lose their transmissibility and

32 Denise Robinson, "'...scarce stains the dust...': Freud's Museum – the Work of Susan Hiller', in James Lingwood (ed.), *Susan Hiller: Recall. Selected Works 1969–2004* (Gateshead, 2004), p. 100.

33 Robinson, "'...scarce stains the dust...'", p. 100.

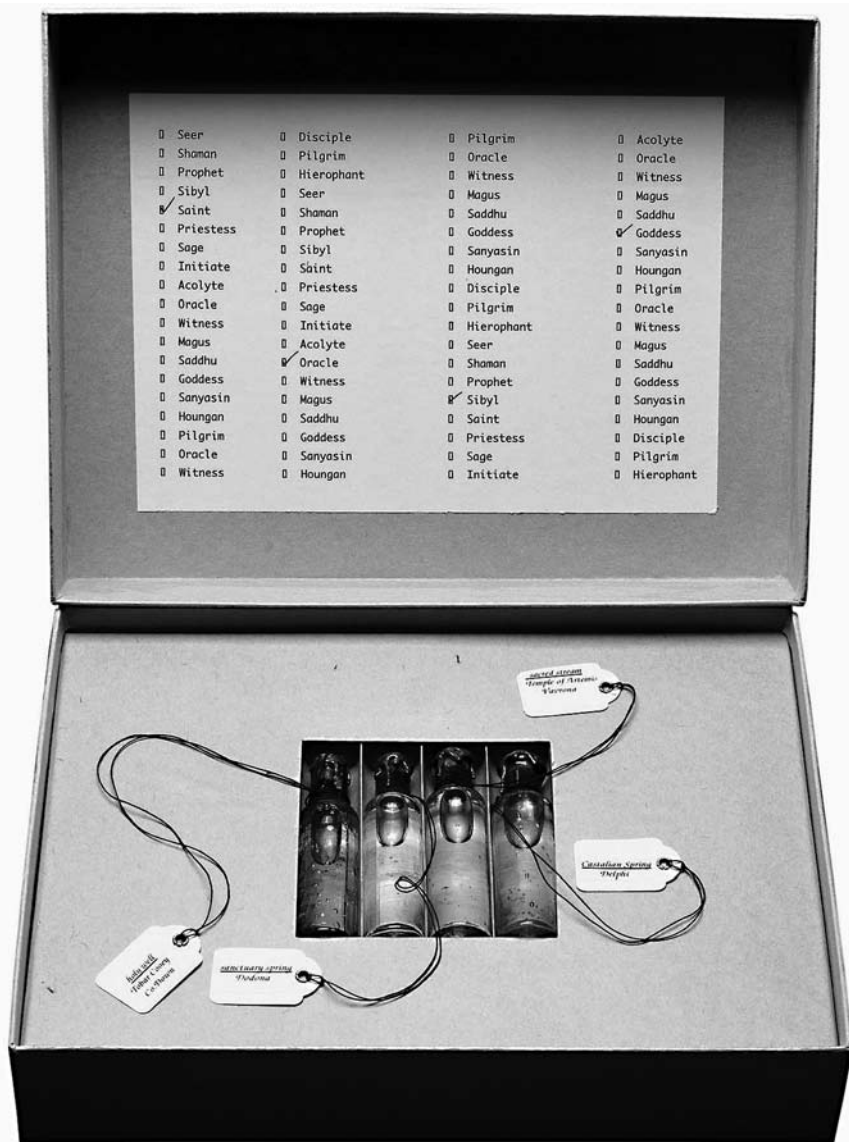


Illustration 3.3 Susan Hiller, *From the Freud Museum*, Tate Modern, London, 1991–97 (Box title: *Sophia/Wisdom*).

their comprehensibility within a given cultural order.’³⁴ At this point, the *thingness* of the thing is violently asserted in a disorientation of perception. This disorientation has been known by various names, such as ‘aesthetic arrest’ or ‘epiphany’ (notions barred from the contemporary academic *polis*). Contributors to this volume share the presupposition that things perform a central role in the constitution of social and cultural relations. But the extent to which such performances – the very substance of social and cultural life – are recuperable is open to question. As historians, we can only access the means by which things are accommodated into past conceptualisations of social life. The things themselves remain mute.

Back in the Museum of London I am trying to understand my troubling encounter with a meaningless pair of medieval shoes. Trying to make sense, I gaze again and again at the medieval shoes. No wonder, as Gustav Flaubert knew, that ‘in the sight of an old pair of shoes, there is something profoundly melancholy’.³⁵

³⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, CA, 1999), p. 94.

³⁵ Michael Ann Holly, ‘Mourning and Method’, *The Art Bulletin*, 84/4 (2002), p. 660.